

Cross Cultural Observations For the Kyrgyz Republic

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Prologue

I have noticed some interesting cultural differences between Americans and Kyrgyz people that you might find interesting as well. There are some things that Kyrgyz people had never done in their lives before, and there are some Kyrgyz things that Americans would never do. Knowledge of these things can help us better understand and communicate with each other.

Many of the below-mentioned cross-cultural observations do not apply in Bishkek, which is a more liberalized, modern, multinational, and well-informed city.

Due to western influence, many people do not observe old Kyrgyz traditions any more, especially city folks and the younger generation. But people who live outside Bishkek still tend to observe them.

Parties/Social Gatherings

Kyrgyz people think of a party as a gathering of close friends or relatives, for pleasure and amusement or to celebrate some occasion, while Americans may throw a party just to meet new people, and for no special occasion.

Drinks

Kyrgyz people usually drink tea, mineral water, kumuz (horse milk), vodka and cognac, but not plain water. Two Kyrgyz men were shocked when they were offered tea with ice. "How can

you have tea with ice?" The answer is simple – Kyrgyz people always drink their tea hot.

Hospitality

Kyrgyz people are hospitable by nature, and by tradition as well. In the old times, if a shepherd was passing by a village with his herd and got hungry, he could without hesitation stop by any house to have food, for free of course. The host was and is supposed to be generous and cordial to her/his guests.

Addressing People

When Americans want a stranger's attention, they say, "Excuse me." The Kyrgyz way of addressing people is quite complicated. It depends on age, and sex. If it is a young lady, we say "chong kyz" (lady); to a young man we say "chong djigit" (gentleman), to a lady older than you are - "edje" (sister), to an older man "baike" (brother), etc. If you wish to address a woman in Russian, say "devushka", a man "mudchjina" or "molodoi chelovek".

Time

When making appointments American tell an exact time, such as "12:45 pm", and come at 12:45 sharp. Kyrgyz people in this case would say "about 1:00 pm" and would come later on. Also, Kyrgyz and Russian people do not usually say how long a party is going to be. If you do, it means you are kicking your guests out, which would be impolite.

Women and Men in a Family

In Kyrgyz families it is taken for granted that women manage the household. Kyrgyz men consider their only responsibility to be to work and make money. Everything else is the woman's job. This tradition is starting to change, particularly in Bishkek, and one will find families where both the husband and wife work outside of the home, however, women still assume the majority of the household chores.

Manners

I have noticed that Americans speak loudly in social places like bars, and restaurants. You can hear what the people at the table next to you are talking about. This is not the case with the Kyrgyz people. Everybody knows that Americans usually smile when they talk to people, and also in pictures. You will rarely see a big smile when talking to Kyrgyz people, and very rarely in pictures.

Hand Shaking

American women shake hands when introducing themselves. In the old tradition it was very uncommon for Kyrgyz women to shake hands, unless they were at official, top level meetings. Only men were supposed to shake hands when greeting someone or meeting a new person. Women will now shake hands.

Middle Names

Kyrgyz and Russian people take their father's first name as their middle names.

Food

Americans may have noticed that an invitation to a Kyrgyz party is usually an invitation to a feast. The feast lasts forever; the food continues to arrive and may consist of a whole sheep, cow or a horse. Plus, you will get never ending portions of other dishes. Guests may be full,

but the food continues. That's why you should not eat before going to a Kyrgyz party.

I'd like to draw your attention to one of the oldest Kyrgyz traditions, which is not always observed nowadays. After the party is over, the host is supposed to give "ustukan" to departing women-guests. "Ustukan" is a portion of the party food that mothers bring home to their kids. Women are often offended when the host does not give them any ustukan, which means that the host doesn't like them, or is greedy. Americans should not be surprised if they get an ustukan.

Some Americans are surprised when they hear that at a party we slaughter animals (usually sheep, cow or horse) in front of the guests, and that we eat not only the meat, but the animal's head, eyes, intestines, heart and brain. Also, horsemeat is considered to be delicious.

Kyrgyz people would find it rude to say "no" when offered food. It means that you don't like the food. You should at least try the food politely.

Tea

Kyrgyz culture has its specific way of pouring tea. It is impolite to pour tea so it splatters. And it is considered impolite for Kyrgyz people not to offer a cup of tea or bread to their guest or anybody who dropped by their house even for two minutes. And guests are not supposed to refuse and should at least taste the bread as a courtesy.

Tips

In the past waiters in restaurants did not expect tips. This has changed, however. Waiters are aware that foreigners give tips and therefore expect them. The average tip is 10% of the total bill. If the service was good tip the waiter directly. Sometimes the tip will be included in the bill so look for a Service Charge first.

Shopping in the Bazaar

In old times, the point of going to the bazaar was not just to purchase or sell goods or services, but also to negotiate/bargain. If a seller says "30 som for apples," it does not necessarily mean there is a fixed price of 30 som. You can negotiate and get them for 15 som. Americans are also expected to bargain in our markets, especially when the initial prices double immediately for foreigners. Your final price should be something between what you initially offer and what the vendor initially offered. Generally, prices in markets are much less (between one third and one half less) than in shops and stores.

Baby Shower

Americans throw baby shower parties to honor and present gifts to babies yet to be born. It is considered bad luck for Kyrgyz people. According to Kyrgyz traditions, you are supposed to give gifts only after the baby is born - never before.

Flowers

The numbers of flowers that we bring to different occasions is very important. You are supposed to bring an even number of flowers to a funeral. Odd numbers of flowers are for any other occasion.

Pets

Kyrgyz families (except in the larger cities) keep dogs as guards to keep thieves away. Dogs are less popular indoor pets as compared to birds and cats.

All other animals are kept for certain purposes: sheep for meat and wool, cows for meat and milk, horses for meat, milk and means of transportation, chicken, geese and ducks for meat and feathers, donkeys as a means of transportation.

Kidnapping of the Bride

Bride kidnapping is the act of abducting a woman to marry her. It includes a variety of actions ranging from consensual marriage to kidnapping and rape. Many Americans do not understand why you have to "kidnap" the person you want to marry. Bride kidnapping is sometimes said to be one of the oldest Kyrgyz traditions, but this is in dispute with current research. In old times, the bridegroom could kidnap any girl in the village to get married, and it was not against any law. But nowadays, this practice still occurs in Kyrgyzstan (primarily, but not exclusively, in the villages), it is against the law and punishable by up to five years in prison. The term "kidnapping" can also be used to define a form of elopement, whereby the kidnapping is usually agreed to and prearranged by both sides.

House Decorating

Some Americans who visit Kyrgyz houses notice that many Kyrgyz not only put carpets on the floor but hang them on the walls as well. Besides carpets you can find tush kiyiz (handmade wall covers, embroidered on the edges), and saima (embroidered with flowers, or people and animals) on the walls.

Another thing to be mentioned about the house is that you are always supposed to take your shoes off when visiting someone's house.

Address Writing

We write addresses differently from Americans. In the address line we write first the Country, then city, street, and at last the name.

Epilogue

The main point of writing this article was for Americans to understand Kyrgyz culture. And since culture often dictates behavior, I thought there should not be any misunderstanding of intentions and behavior.

You will meet with not only liberalized Bishkek people but also folks from outside Bishkek. I want Americans to be ready for Kyrgyz cultural surprises, i.e. some Americans say that Kyrgyz have “terrorist hospitality”

during parties, where food is endless and the host is trying to make you drunk. But according to tradition, hosts have to do it if they want to be polite and nice.

More About Social Gatherings/ Parties/ Receptions

The First Rule is that we do not go to parties or receptions uninvited. A personal invitation is preferred. It means that you are welcome and you are a desirable guest.

The Second Rule is you have to be prepared for lots of food. There is no Kyrgyz party without food and I mean lots of food.

The Third Rule is that everybody is supposed to be able to make toasts. The longer the toast, the better. Toasts supposedly show your intelligence. To make a toast is the same as to make a speech before a big auditorium. That’s why some people, before going to a party or reception, prepare a speech or toast.

The Fourth Rule is that we never start eating the food until the host invites us to the table. And, we always let the eldest or honored guests try the food first.

There are also special seats for guests during informal parties. The eldest person or honored guest is usually invited to sit either at the head of the table, or at the “tyor” (a seat far from the door). Only young people or hosts sit by the door “to be waiters”. Also, in general, the younger you are the more work you do.

The Fifth Rule is a very important rule. You should not refuse any food offered. If you do, it means you either do not like the host or the food.

The Sixth Rule is for hosts of private parties. They are supposed to feed guests by bringing dishes all the time. The dishes have to be hot, including the tea. Guests are usually invited to have a cup of tea first, until all the guests arrive. They are then invited to the main course. It is very rude not to invite guests to a table at all. Please note also that it is not necessary for guests to show up right on time to private party.

Hosts do not ask the question “Would you like to drink something?” they just give it to you.

Also, hosts do not let guests wash their own dishes after the meal.

Beliefs and Superstitions of the Kyrgyz People

The following are some beliefs and superstitions of the Kyrgyz people. I personally do not believe them, but decided to write about them for your information. Most of the Kyrgyz people don't believe them, but they do practice them anyway. The superstitions have become part of every day life of the Kyrgyz and Russian people, and have some effect on people's behavior. And, of course, they vary in every region.

They say it is bad luck:

- To come back home for something you've forgotten.
- If a black cat runs across your path.
- Do not kill a spider. It brings guests to your house.
- Do not sit at the corner of a table/desk; you will never get married.
- Do not look in a broken mirror.
- Do not whistle in the house, especially at night. You will have no money.
- If your ears are burning, it means somebody is talking about you.